What is Democratic Socialism?

“Democratic socialism” is a phrase that is, suddenly, unavoidable. Our organization, the Democratic Socialists of America, has now grown to over 50,000 members nationwide (with well over 1000 here in Austin). But the phrase is poorly understood, especially by those outside of our ranks. So what do we mean when we talk about “Democratic socialism?” How does it differ from other political traditions? What kind of history does democratic socialism have? And how can we talk about it to our friends, neighbors, co-workers, and family members?

Introductory Texts

The bulk of our discussion will focus on these three pieces, which lay out a basic vision of democratic socialism and talk about what democratic socialists actually do, in addition to what they think.

Megan Day – Democratic Socialism Explained (estimated reading time: 8 minutes) – This Vox article is written by a DSA member, and explains why socialists want to go beyond reforming and regulating capitalism.

Neal Meyer – What is Democratic Socialism (estimated reading time: 12 minutes) – This Jacobin article, also written by a DSA member spells out the basics of democratic socialism, especially how it differs from liberalism and social democracy. It also names many of the challenges democratic socialists face, and what we can do to get past them.

Resistance Rising (estimated reading time: 28 minutes) – This is a moderate-length document, dating from the summer of 2016, in which DSA lays out its analysis of the current political moment, its vision for democratic socialism, and its strategy for getting there.

Intermediate Text

We will also talk about this piece which provides some historical context about socialism, include some of its less-than-democratic varieties. The piece is long; if you’re pressed for time, just read the intro, section 3, and sections 9 and 10.

Hal Draper – The Two Souls of Socialism – (estimated reading time: 1 hour total, excerpts total about 30 minutes) This medium-length pamphlet from 1960 sets out a difference between

“Socialism-from-Below,” (related to democratic socialism) and “Socialism-from-Above” (which the author links to both Stalinism and social democracy). Draper also puts forwards a basic history of the international socialist movement (with some big omissions) and describes how they relate to the categories of “Socialism-from-Below” or “Socialism-from-Above.” We won’t be talking about the entire pamphlet, so if you can only read part of it, focus on the Introduction, section 3 (“What Marx Did,”) and sections 9 and 10 (“Six Strains of Socialism-from-Above” and “Which Side Are You On?”)

Further Reading

We won’t talk much about this piece, but this fills in some gaps from the above readings and offers a somewhat different roadmap for building democratic socialism than the document put together by DSA.

Nicos Poulantzas – Towards a Democratic Socialism – (estimated reading time: 45 minutes) This essay, written in 1978, is a more challenging text about the various pitfalls of two insufficiently democratic roads to socialism: the social-democratic model of Western Europe and the insurrectionary model of the the Third International, the international organization headed by the Soviet Union before the Second World War. Poulantzas, like Day, Meyer, Draper, and most of the contemporary DSA, sees popular struggle as central to the project of building democratic socialism. He makes some concrete proposals to the sorts of institutions that socialists will have to build and actions they’ll have to take on the road to socialism.

Discussion Questions

1. Before these readings, what did you think was meant by “democratic socialism? How did these readings line up with your understanding?
2. According to the texts, what are the key features of socialism? What problems of existing society do socialists seek to solve, and how do they propose to solve them?
3. What does DSA mean when we say “democratic?” How is this different than the currently existing democracy governing society?
4. What is DSA’s strategy towards building socialism? What do you think of this strategy?
5. The Resistance Rising document was written two years ago, before the election of Donald Trump. How has its analysis held up? How well does the strategy it lays out apply to the current political moment?
6. What does Draper mean by “Socialism-from-Below?” In what ways, if any, does DSA’s strategy meet the criteria of “Socialism-from-Below?” Is there anything in DSA’s strategy that seems to fit more under the category of “Socialism-from-Above?”

Class and Class Struggle

Introductory Texts

Vivek Chibber – Why Do Socialists Talk About the Working Class? (estimated reading time: 12 minutes) – This, from Jacobin magazine, provides a basic overview of what socialists mean when they talk about class, and why its at the center of socialist politics.

Ellen Meiksins Wood – Why Class Struggle is Central (estimated reading time: 12 minutes) – This short piece from Ellen Meiksins Wood, from the late 1980's, talks about why class is at the center of socialist practice, even if class oppression is only one of many oppressions (and not necessarily the one most oppressive to its victims).

Eric Blanc – Betting on the Working Class – (estimated reading time: 9 minutes) – Eric Blanc uses the example of the recent teacher strikes to discuss the way class struggle can play out in the current political moment.

Intermediate Texts

Peter Camejo – Liberalism, Ultraleftism, or Mass Action – (estimated reading time: 40 minutes) – In this speech from 1970, Peter Camejo illustrates, through the example of the anti-war movement, how much power that the working class already has in society. He argues that there can be no substitute for organized mass working class action, either through finding responsive politicians or acts of symbolic protest.

Barbara and John Ehrenreich – Death of a Yuppie Dream – (estimated reading time: 20 minutes) – What about the Middle Class? DSA founding member Barbara Ehrenreich, who coined the term "Professional-Managerial Class," considers the question of the class that comes in between the working class and the capitalist class. Her and frequent collaborator John Ehrenreich provide a history of a Professional-Managerial Class in decline and considers the legacy of this short-lived class.

Further Reading

Nancy Fraser – From Redistribution to Recognition – (estimated reading time: 1 hour) – Marxist Feminist Nancy Fraser, in the mid-nineties, evaluates movements of the "post-socialist" left. She considers how movements that demand the recognition of difference can coexist with socialism, a movement that demands the abolition of class society (and class difference alongside it). She also puts forward a distinction between "affirmative" and "transformative" solutions for injustice.

Discussion Questions

1. What do socialists mean specifically when they talk about class? How is different from how most people in America talk about class?
2. What is it about class oppression that causes socialists to put it at the forefront of their political vision? In what way is class oppression different than other types of oppression?
3. In what ways, if any, might this approach to class fall short of a truly transformative political vision? What could DSA do to make up for those shortcomings?
4. Many of the authors make reference to a special structural power possessed by the working class. What accounts for that structural power, and how could a group like DSA leverage that power?
5. DSA is often criticized for being a "middle-class" organization. Do you think that's a fair criticism? If so, what could DSA do to address that criticism?
6. What does Camejo mean when he talks about "liberalism" and "ultra-leftism?" How does that relate to the vision of class put forward in the other articles?

Ecosocialism

Introductory Texts

Alyssa Battistoni – Alive in the Sunshine (estimated reading time: 20 minutes) – This, from Jacobin magazine, argues that a socialist approach to fixing climate change starts with working less and new approaches to structuring society.

Kate Aronoff – Your Personal Consumption Choices Can't Save the Planet (estimated reading time: 10 minutes) – This article from In These Times argues that collective political action, not individual consumption choices, is the only path forward to saving the planet.

Naomi Klein – The Game Changing Promise of a Green New Deal – (estimated reading time: 15 minutes) – This recent article from the Intercept makes the case that freshman congressperson and democratic socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's plan for a Green New Deal is an ambitious and realistic plan to save the planet by restructuring the economy

Intermediate Texts

Benjamin Kunkel – The Captitalocene – (estimated reading time: 45 minutes) – This article, from the London Review of Books, looks at three recent books from the world of Ecological Marxism. The authors of these books (as well as the author the piece) argue that the current climate crisis is a result of capitalism, rather than "human activity" in general and argues that we now face a choice between ecosocialism or ethnobarbarism.

Further Reading

Zhihe Wang – Ecological Marxism in China – (estimated reading time: 20 minutes) – Eco-Marxism is more well received in China than it is in the United States or Europe, though environmentalism in general faces a steep climb towards adoption by a government focused on growth and development.

John Bellamy Foster – Marx and the Rift in the Universal Metabolism of Nature – (estimated reading time: 45 minutes) – Although Marx was writing well before the current climate crisis, elements of his writing provide a powerful lens with which to view ecological crisis.

Relevant Listening

Alan Thornett, Gordon Peters, Judith Watson, and R.S. Man – Eco-Socialist Transitions as Alternatives to Capitalism

Sasha Scott and Lindsay Casar – Can Technology Solve the Climate Crisis?

Discussion Questions

1. How does the socialist approach to climate change differ from the approach favored by the mainstream media and the two major political parties?
2. In a socialist approach to climate change, who or what is standing in the way of a solution to climate change? How might we be able to get past those obstacles?
3. How might an ecosocialist future differ from our capitalist present? In what ways might our lives be better? What might we need to sacrifice?
4. Why is the “Green New Deal” such an exciting prospect? In what ways might it come up short
5. A solution to global climate change can’t come from just one country. What kind of international cooperation might be necessary to solve climate change? How could that work in a world where living standards vary so sharply from nation to nation?
6. How has the current climate crisis developed throughout history? How is that related to the way that capitalism has developed over a similar time period?